{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

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WHAT SHALL WE DO

WITH THE RELIGION OF OUR FATHERS AND MOTHERS?

BY ALBERT WALKLEY.

Honor thy father and thy mother.—Ex. xx., 12.
I press toward the mark for the prize of our high calling.—Phil. iii., 14.

This question, What shall we do with the religion of our fathers and mothers? is one which we may treat with a tender consideration not given to every question. No matter how we may differ from our fathers and mothers in thought, the oldest and youngest of us have a feeling of reverence for their thought, and that simply because it was their thought. We pity the man who forgets the old commandment, Honor thy father and thy mother; he has lost a great thing out of life. Macaulay has somewhere a saying like this, that he who has no pride in his ancestors will leave nothing of which his descendants may be proud. We may change the thought and say that he who honors not his father and mother will not be likely to have much in himself worthy the respect of his children.

I take the old words, Honor thy father and thy mother, for a very good reason; I wish both of them in my mind and in yours. We speak of the religion of the fathers, while to give full character to the thought we ought to say the religion of the fathers and mothers. We certainly have that idea in mind, without giving it expression. We now give it expression. And well we may; for the work and influence of both go to the making up of our characters—our religious thought. It is a common enough thought that it is from the mothers we get our religion. But in this I think we do injustice both to the fathers and to religious thought

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itself. Let us go back to the old days—and this is likely what you find—a father who gave less attention to the church than did the mother—and who did not accept all that the creeds and ministers said. Nevertheless the upright, honest, outspoken, manly character of that father had a wonderful influence over us, and by his character moulded us into honest men. Again his short and perhaps sharp words about honesty, about being a man through thick and thin, helped us to be honest and true. His religion was the practical, every day religion for this world. Along with this may have gone a hopeful spirit which took a bright outlook and so lifted us into the region of pure and undefiled religion. But this side of our religious being received from the mother its greatest help and was by her developed. It was she who came with words of hope and trust, who bade us hope in darkness, and trust amid doubt and sorrow. She trusted and we learned from her to trust. "All is well," was her word, and though we could hardly see it, yet her faith became our faith—and clings to us to-day. Without any aid from me the scenes of the past come up—the child's prayers and hymns—which though now meaningless, as far as the words are concerned, yet have some lingering religious life, because they call back old home scenes and her words of hope and trust and love.

But along with this true religious teaching and example went a theology which now seems apart from the deep emotion of religion. I cannot in looking back help feeling that the theology was superficial, it touched us so very little in our lives. And yet coming from lips which spake to us the dearest and sweetest words, lips that moved in words of cheer and comfort, this theology has weight. If we could only separate it from the religion of our childhood we should find it very light. But being saturated through and through with the religion of mother and home, it has weight beyond its due. The same lips which bade us trust God, also bade us shun eternal hell. The same lips which moved in company with ours in the simple prayer also told the shocking story of redemption in the blood of Jesus. The lips that taught us the Lord's prayer told us of a personal devil going about seeking whom he may devour. The lips that told us God loved the world also told us that He had left millions of heathen without the gospel light, and so left them to perish. The lips that told us the sweet story of Jesus' life were not backward in condemning as impostors the great teachers of other lands, so far as these teachers were then known. Nothing then so becomes thinking men now as to separate the sweet and hopeful religion of our mothers from their harsh and cruel theology. This, their theology, would not have had a moment's thought from us but that it came laden with childhood's happy memories, laden with the memories of a voice and face most precious to us. It is then with no rough hand we handle even the theology of those we love. We cannot but retain some respect for what was so dear to those who are so dear to us. I think that in the battle of life great injustice has been done the men who dare to question the thought of the fathers and mothers. Think you that the one questioning has no tender memories—has no hallowed associations—which are more or less connected with what he believes to be false? Dream not that the one who fails to speak holds in himself all the sweet memories, all the tenderest feelings—and deepest sympathies. It is not so. Many have groaned and gone forth with the burden of their message weeping. Send not me, has been their cry. But being sent they told the message boldly. They shrank not. On God's altar they put a sacrifice which if not as dear as a son was the next thing to it—the memories of the past—the words of a mother. They point us to Abraham who was ready to offer Isaac—and they praise him. But these men have come with their sacrifices, and no

ram was caught in the thicket which might take the place of their offering. They offered, and while the smoke of their offering was ascending to heaven the curses of their fellows were falling thick upon their heads. Alone they might regret the demand put upon them, but in public no eye must know it. There they must stand without flinching, and question the things handed down to us by our dear ones, things saturated with our brightest memories, things consecrated by sainted mothers' prayers and blessings. The men who dare thus to speak are not stones, they are human; they have hearts not of granite but of flesh. They feel—and feel keenly.

But how can we help question? It is not we who put these questions, rather are they in the atmosphere about us. If we answer, we must answer not as feeling but as reason dictates. "But let these questions alone"—says one. Do you know what you say—what you ask? With all due respect I say no man who thinks could so speak. It means, stop thinking. And that means for the mind just what "stop breathing" would mean for the body. We must think, and if we think, we must think on the problems which our age presents. Each age presents its own problems. We therefore dare question the theology of our fathers and mothers. It is not good enough for us. I do not ask you to lay aside one atom of respect for the religion which made her a saint in your ideas, for religion is the same yesterday, to-day and forever, it is the same in all climes. The religion of the Hindoo mother was the same as that of your mother—though their theologies differed greatly. Nor would I ask you to lay aside your kindly feeling for the theology of our fathers and mothers. But this I do ask, that while we give feeling its proper place we do not allow it to dominate over all. Let us carry, along with our kindly feelings, common sense and sound reason.

When I go back a few years the world has to me, so far as theology is concerned, a very quiet appearance. It seems to me as if it were at rest—as if it had settled its theological difficulties and was contented. No theological wind disturbed the peaceful calm. Without question, we took the Bible as God's word; Genesis told the exact story of creation; all the miracles were undoubted historical facts, which we of course never dreamed of questioning; Jesus was the son of God, God and man, who came to redeem us from eternal death, which eternal death was a very literal thing; the heathen were outside the pale, and were perishing by millions, and we were just waking up to missionary work; their teachers, what little we knew of them, were blind leaders of the blind; and to close all, the book of Revelation was a wonderful book over which we sometimes puzzled, but out of which we never got an idea. My friends, this is not the theology of the *books*, but of our *homes*—God bless these homes! Now I say that if it were not that "home" and mother went alongside this theology it would have been banished long ago amid the hisses of mankind.

Into this quiet atmosphere, in time, came a stray wind from afar. Hugh Miller got into our homes, and geology began timidly to come alongside the book of Genesis; and as time went on geology became bolder and began to ask Genesis some very puzzling questions, which were in a way answered. But somehow the answer did not please this new thing on earth, and so more questions were put, and by and by a battle was on hand, until at last Genesis laid down its arms, and said, I don't teach science but religion; you keep your place, geology, and I will keep mine. So Genesis is left to us a beautiful poem—no more—no less. But it is by no means the Genesis of our fathers and mothers. After this inroad into the infallible authority of the Bible had been made, others began to strike out from it in new paths. The miracles of the Old Testament did not fit into any niches in our minds. God had made no niche in our minds into

which the miracle of Joshua making the sun to stand still could fit. Of this miracle there was no end of explanations, until at last it was discovered it was a verse from an old poet. Then Jonah and the whale came in for criticism until the whole book became a very helpful parable. In time the miracles were ignored, or explained away, or spiritualized out of meaning and common sense. Surely the old Bible is not the Bible we learned in the days gone by. In spite of ourselves we have drifted away from it. With the Old Testament the New is so closely linked that it too came up for examination. The hard sayings of Paul, where he seems so Calvinistic (using a modern term) first were doubted by us, then put aside, until Paul was looked upon as a noble teacher but not always a sure guide. In time the miracles of Jesus took their places alongside those of the Old Testament. If the miracles of the Old Testament were poetic figures, why not those of the New? We settled down to the thought that whatever truth there was in the miracles of Jesus would in time be explained on natural grounds, or they would be shown to be transformed parables, or dreams of loving disciples. The New Testament of our day is not that of yesterday and nothing can make it what it once was.

What a paradise of ignorance was ours about the great world outside our Christendom. That great life which belonged to the people in India and China was almost an unknown thing to us. We had heard of those lands. And reports of their doings hardly made us wish to know much more about them. We believed they were in sad need of missionary work. Our idea of this great world was that of a world in darkness—absolutely uncivilized. The people were perishing because *our* glad tidings had not reached them, and they had no glad tidings of their own. The old hymn, "From Greenland's icy mountains, From India's coral strand," gives the idea in full which was ours regarding the lands of the East. Though these lands were fair and almost paradise, yet the one thing that spoiled all was "vile man:" "And only man is vile." Then stirred to enthusiasm and touched with our Western-world egotism we sang,

> "Shall we whose souls are lighted
> By wisdom from on high,
> Shall we to men benighted,
> The lamp of life deny?"

We indeed looked upon these as lands of darkness—while the light of heaven streamed right down upon us. But in time those who went East brought back certain names, Confucius and Buddha and Zoroaster. These names were somewhat known to oriental scholars, but only vaguely. But the commerce of the world soon brought them before the minds of the people. But what vague, cloudy things these names were! And what strange ideas we had of the teachings of these men. But time is a wonderful revolutionizer; it soon changed all, and these names began to fit *real* men. Confucius beame real, and Buddha became real and Zoroaster became real. And we learned that these men had helpful words for the people of their times and countries. We found that their words were wonderfully like the words of our own religious teaching. Our paradise of ignorant bliss was destroyed. We soon learned that as the sun cast its rays upon all earth, so had God's love and truth been shed down upon all lands in more or less degree. We have come to believe that God's hand is leading even the lowest, slowly but surely, into the light—the blessed light of God. But what has become of our Jesus and our Christianity? These have taken their places along with the great teachers and religious systems of earth. All teachers and all systems must give place to that higher religious thought which is the outgrowth of all others. Say what we may, if we think at all this is where we find ourselves at the end of our thinking. The Jesus and the Christianity of the dear mother are not and cannot be the Jesus and Christianity of our day.

I can see as I look back the coming into our humanity of a tenderness which did not belong to the past. And this tenderness is of a kind which does not bound itself by national lines, but goes out to all mankind. I can see it spreading itself until nations are really trying to do each other justice. I can now (for it is only a thing of these latter days) almost feel the incoming of that sympathy which linked us to the lower world, a sympathy which gave birth to humane societies, a sympathy which felt the pain suffered by horse and dog. But it ended not here; it went down deeper until one is conscious of a fellow-feeling for the little animalcules which are the first in animal life. As this grew deeper and deeper we were made to feel the depths of tenderness in man. And then we looked up and asked: Is God less tender? Does he need that any stand in our place offering himself to appease an angry God? We answered, No. In the same answer we put away from ourselves all thought of the old eternal-torment idea. Another question came up. As we looked upon the beginnings of life, and seemed almost to get next the Eternal Spirit in the study of these minute living things, we asked if there was any need that any one come between us and God at all, and we answered, No.

Nature in its turn took hold upon us, its wonders above, and its wonders below. We had thought of the vastness of heaven, and to it found no end. But we found unfathomable mysteries right near us. The growing grass, the chick in the egg, the unbounded life reaching to depths away below naked vision;—all made us feel what profound depths are these in the midst of which we live. It seemed as if we were brushing at every step alongside the Great Spirit. All these simple things spake to us of the Infinite back of all. And we asked, Is God, the God our mothers talked about, is he that narrow God of the Bible? We answered, No.

We cannot help ourselves. If we think, we see the theologies of our fathers and mothers floating like clouds in the heavens above us, floating away over the hills, away out of sight, and in their place is the clear blue sky of God. We are no more to blame for this than we are for the real clouds above us, which pass over our heavens and are lost back of the hills.

My friends, I have laid no ruthless hand on the theology we learned from her whose lips spake for us as never lips spake before or since. I am only giving the pictures that float before my mind. But we may ask without any charge of irreverence: Did our fathers and mothers think out their theologies? The only answer which can be given this in accordance with the truth is that few of them did. They accepted their theology from their fathers and mothers, who also accepted it from those before them. But our time demands of us that we think on these things and think out our own conclusions. If however ours were among the thinking fathers and mothers of the past, then this imposes doubly upon us that we walk in their footsteps, and think for ourselves. Cowper in looking upon a picture of his mother exclaimed:

"Oh, that those lips had language!"

I believe that if the cherished portraits of the fathers and mothers had lips with language they would charge us to think out conclusions for ourselves rather than lend our minds, even in affection, to the mind of another, how great soever that other might have been.

And now, my friends, I trust you have marked closely my line of thought. I come not with any word bidding you throw away the religion which was that of those we love. Very far from it. That which was religion and religious in the life and teachings of our dear ones is in accord with the *one* great and only religion, which loves God and serves Him, loves man and helps him. But we must distinguish between the theology of our dear ones and their religion. And even after doing this we are not careless-

ly or thoughtlessly to repudiate the theology of our fathers, but to think the matter over for ourselves; think it over carefully and prayerfully in the fuller light of our time. A more tender humanity is ours than was that of the past; a broader sympathy is ours; a wider knowledge of the thought of other peoples is ours. All these must cast their light upon the questions we seek to answer. If in this fuller light the old theology seems to you the true, in God's name accept it. But if the old is in need of revision, and in need of an uplifting, fear not to revise it or to accept the later evolution in thought. To do otherwise is to be untrue to the very religion that was that of our fathers and mothers. The old word is the grand word—"Honor thy father and thy mother." But not less in respect is the other—"I press toward the mark for the prize of our high calling," which high calling is to know the truth and to live it.

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